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Awesome Media Strategies – Tips from a Professional Reporter, Roy Stearns  
California Department of Parks and Recreation

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Many park and recreation professionals run a gamut of emotions when dealing with the media. Some are frustrated and understandably hesitant to contact or respond to a reporter about a story if they feel they have been wronged in the past. Others look forward to getting their agency's story out to the media and are disappointed when their calls or email messages are not returned. Yet others feel their press releases should be reprinted as submitted and realize too late that they contain spelling and grammatical errors which can be embarrassing.

*"Parks are first in everyone's heart, but last in their wallet. Effective communication and a healthy media relationship allows for more of the public to see parks for what they really are — essential places in everyone's community." Roy Stearns*

As park and recreation professionals, we have a lot at stake in effectively dealing with the media. Promoting our positive community-building message during these uncertain international and economic times can be a challenge. At the last two CPRS conferences, seasoned reporter and former TV anchor Roy Stearns provided a number of useful strategies for working with the media. Roy is the Deputy Director for Communications for the Department of Parks and Recreation and here are his tips.

Are there such things as sure-fire strategies for getting the media's attention? The answer is both yes and no. Remember that the reporter writing the story and the newspaper editor writing the editorial has the final say over what appears. However, there are methods and tactics you can employ and practice on a regular basis that will dramatically improve your odds for gaining positive media attention.

Strategy #1: Be proactive. Get to know your media sources and your reporters.

Reporters work hard to gain sources and contacts. You should do the same. Keep a media binder that has the name, media outlet, phone number, and email address for every reporter you talk to...*every one of them!* Jot down a fast note about your reaction to that reporter. Supply those that are friendly to your agency stories and work to develop a strong relationship with them. Doing this will create trust and credibility and you will be supplying a regular inventory of stories you want seen in your newspaper or on TV. You become a person the particular reporter knows, trusts and perhaps even likes...*a trusted source*. This will work to your favor if or when things go sour. If the reporter calls with bad news or a potentially a negative story, the reporter know who to call first — you, and will be more inclined to come to you in a fair approach with questions — and that's what you want.

*Feed the Beast!  
The media wants  
a good story!*

When a reporter asks a direct question, give a short and plain-spoken answer. “Know when to stop talking after you’ve covered your primary points. It’s a good idea to also ask clarifying questions of the reporter,” Roy explains.

Our profession serves the public in many, many ways. When speaking to a reporter, speak in terms of public interest. An obvious example is when park and recreation agencies face severely declining budgets, speak in terms of reduced staff positions and programs, or how things are going to be managed differently. “Describe how the public will be directly affected and what steps you (your agency) are taking to overcome this struggle. Do so by providing concrete facts. Reporters appreciate you providing the data for them,” Roy said.

### Strategy #2 – Never miss an opportunity.

Watch for story opportunities. Roy recalls, “When I was recently at a major acquisition dedication in southern California, I noticed a ranger speaking off to the side with an individual who was on horse back. I checked into the situation and found that there was a story waiting to be told regarding an upcoming trail opening.” This is an example of having members of your agency or our many park volunteers provide story tips. It is important to develop sources and contacts within your own organization and determine who would do well with media interviews. “The ranger did a super job describing the project to the reporter and had several volunteers working in the background. It was a great story and it gave our department some great press,” Roy explained.

*“It’s hard for a reporter to respond negatively to someone if the staff or volunteer is someone the reporter really likes.” Roy Stearns*

Find a hook for the story; offer something enticing, like a tour of a historic facility or the behind-the-scenes tour of a sports facility. Offer exclusivity. A reporter loves to know that he/she ‘owns’ the story. Roy explains, “By creating a happy reporter, you have gained a strong ally.”

Strategy #3 – Be reactive without fail. When a reporter calls, return the call ASAP and remember that most reporters are working under deadlines and are under pressure to get the job done. Try to understand that reporters need you to complete the story and if they are unsuccessful in reaching you the story may appear lopsided or incomplete. Waiting or any delay might rule you out of the story, which means that your side of the story will be dead and/or irrelevant.

When a reporter calls, be accessible. When bad news is at your doorstep, this is when you should be the most accessible. Try to be patient and don’t automatically expect understanding of complicated issues. If the reporter is insisting on an answer, know that you don’t have to give an answer right at that instance. You can say that you need to gather further information. Find out what the reporter’s deadline is, gather the information you need and talk to people to get your side of the story organized. Get back to the reporter with hard facts and meet the deadline. To set the record straight, make a bold stroke. Seek a bold answer that might steal the headline.

If you feel your agency is getting a raw deal, and your agency is right, do not hesitate to react strongly to make sure the reporter gets the message that the other side could be very wrong. In his book SPIN, Michael Sitrick says, “Do something predictable and the press will yawn.

Do something silly to get their attention, and they'll mock you mercilessly. Do something unexpected and meaningful and you'll make the front page."

If you know that negative news is coming, consider a preemptive strike. The side that speaks first often sets the tone and pace and frames the debate, for following stories. "Shape the argument and you'll shape the headlines," Roy explains. "Never ever lie! Get your truth and the facts in their true context of the story. If you don't know, say so, don't make something up." If things are juxtaposed to make it look like your agency is at fault, and you're not, get to work straightening it out," he continued. Never let a mistake or errors go unchallenged. Doing so locks those mistakes and errors into the historical archives. Remember, don't speculate, or provide a hypothetical answer. And avoid absolutes like 'never' or 'always' in your conversations with reporters. These will come back to worry you! If you don't know the answer to the question, by all means, try to not get caught in speculating; simply say that you don't know.

A word of caution on using 'No Comment.' The media senses a vacuum and if you don't respond or refuse to comment, that's the end of the discussion from the perspective of the reporter. They'll find someone else to talk to, perhaps someone not to your liking. Some reporters may feel that silence is the same as admitting guilt. At the very least, you can explain why it is you can't respond to the reporter's question.

#### Strategy #4 – Write your own stories.

Every park system and agency has positive programs, events, and facilities. Some agencies have staff or volunteers that are able to write a feature story using quotes from people involved and then sends to the medium and small papers throughout the state. State Parks has a public information officer that writes 8-10 stories a year and then shotguns them throughout the state. Some papers ask for pictures and nearly all of the stories get printed 'as is.'

#### Strategy #5 – Have a web page and use it to your advantage.

Put up a "PressRoom" section on your web page with every press release. Put helpful facts on your facilities, programs, upcoming meetings, and events. Make sure reporters know it's there.

#### Strategy #6 – Use email in place of faxes.

More and more reporters prefer corresponding via email. Send your stories, news releases, and announcements electronically but be sure to include facts and a follow up phone number.

#### Strategy #7 – Train your staff.

Train your staff to effectively work with the media. Help them to understand your audience. In public relations, you must understand the wants and needs of the general public. As a staff member dealing with the press, you must understand the wants and needs of reporters, editors, producers and assignment editors. If you know how reporters think and work, you will know what you can do to meet the need and get positive attention. Study the media's approach to issues and be prepared for all kinds of questions.

### Strategy #8 – The Bottom line!

- Effective public relations is all about relationships.
- Effective public relations is all about credibility.
- Effective public relations is all about trust.
- Effective public relations is all about telling your story and being understood.

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